

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, January 14, 2007

Sermon Text: John 2:1-11

Now, I do know right about sermon time in the worship service, there are some private prayers going on out there. One is, Lord, I hope he has something to say, and the other is, Lord, I hope he says it quickly. I know that. I think I do have something to say today. My staff makes fun of me when I say, “Stay with me,” but I’m going to say it anyway. Stay with me, I think I have something to say. First, a story.

A story that I collected and that I like, and it will ease us into the topic of the water into wine. I collected this from Reader’s Digest, and you know the kind of corny humor is in there. It’s preacher humor, and that’s what I’m going to share with you today.

It was about a woman who wrote in, and said, “My college-bound daughter, a freshman going off to college, had to fill out a dorm questionnaire to find a roommate in her first dormitory experience. She said, “In our traditional Jewish family, my husband blesses a cup of wine at home on the Sabbath, and gives each family member a sip.” This ritual imbibing of wine was the only experience the daughter had had with alcohol. The mother said she was glad that she checked the questionnaire before she sent it off because under “Do you imbibe alcoholic beverages?” she checked “Yes.” There was a line after that, “How frequently?” and the daughter had written “religiously.” I think that’s a good story.

Now, water into wine. This is a theme throughout the New Testament. Wine. Wine is mentioned quite a few times and symbolically. I’m going to take it in a symbolic sense this morning. What Jesus did was, first of all, we need to understand how disorderly and how unseemly it was. You see the baptismal font right there. Do you know what that water was for? It was for ritual purification. He took six stone jars, normally used for the ritual purification, and He had them filled to the brim, and turned them into giant carafes of wine. Imagine if someone took our baptismal font – their punchbowl broke – they took it into the fellowship hall, and used it as a punchbowl. Imagine! How would the Worship Committee react? Where’s Gladys? Gladys is not here to even hear it. It’s a good thing. You get the picture. Jesus claimed the authority to break the rules and put these jars and this water for ritual purification to an entirely different use. It was His first miracle, and He turned plain old ritual water jars filled with plain old water into the finest wine the steward of the feast had ever tasted, saving the best for last.

Jesus continued talking about new wine. In His teaching later on, you will remember that Jesus compared His teaching to the laws and the ritual, which came before, and He said that this new wine couldn’t be contained within the old wine skins, within the old ritual traditions. It couldn’t be contained. It would burst forth beyond it. At the same time, Jesus said you couldn’t put a patch, new unshrunk cloth on an old garment, that it would shrink up and pull loose. It just wouldn’t fit. No, the speaking of the old ritual and law and rule on top of rule that the priests and the scribes had added, making it impossible. They had added to what God required, making it impossible to keep them all. Jesus was saying, “I did not come to patch the old system or to add just one new thing here or one

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new thing there. I came bringing something entirely new and good and unexpected and hopeful and joyful and life-giving and weight-lifting. I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.

As Paul said in Romans, all the law ever did was reveal to us that, yes, it's God's will, but on the other hand, from a human point of view, it revealed that no one ever, ever, ever kept the law except Jesus alone. He alone kept the law, which Jesus boiled down to, Jesus said, all of the law and all of the prophets boil down to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus alone kept the law. Loving God completely, loving neighbor completely in heart and in mind and in deed. Every other one of us on the face of this earth and who has ever been falls short in heart, mind, or deed in keeping this law of love.

Now, what is this law of which I speak? If you really boil it down, it is the Ten Commandments. The first half of the Ten Commandments has to do with loving God. The second half has to do with loving neighbors. Jesus did speak of it in that way, the law and the prophets, love God, love neighbor. It is a consistent theme throughout the Bible, for Jesus came not to do away with the law, but He fulfilled it, He lived it, He also suffered temptation and death for you and for me, and one more thing. After death, He rose from the grave. Not even sin, this was to prove that not even sin and death had power over God's love. Regardless of our sin, which is real, and regardless of our sinfulness and imperfections, which are real and abundantly clear, God loves us. God loves us.

Even though in complete holiness, God demanded that we live within the guidelines of loving God and loving neighbor, we cannot, we have not, not even for a day, succeeded in living within these boundaries. God's love, God's new wine, so much better than just rule and ritual and regulation and sacrifice, God's love found a way to keep us in His embrace. God in Christ kept the law. God sent His Holy Spirit also to comfort, to strengthen, and to grow in us the ability to love and to grow in us the ability to feel compassion for one another. We're not just alone with a bunch of rules. That's the old wine. We have God's own Holy Spirit with us and within us to enable us to live new lives filled with this new wine that Jesus said couldn't be contained with all that came before.

At Pentecost, you will remember, that when the disciples were enabled by God's spirit to preach in many different languages, the people mockingly said, "They are filled with new wine." Peter said, "No, no, no, they are filled with the Holy Spirit." Thus that theme continues.

The new things that Jesus brought are new wine, uncontainable within the old traditions, the entry of the very Kingdom of God on earth, was begun in Jesus Christ. And God's Kingdom, which cannot be contained within one people or one nation is just this. It is God acting to recreate this earth, to bring it back into the vision that God had from the very beginning of intimate contact and communion between God and humanity and

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between one human and another. Love God and love neighbor. Jesus lived that out, and He came to bring that about. A new creation! New lives! New heart! New ability to love!

It's not hard to understand the Kingdom of God, but it is very hard to make it happen because just as the old Covenant priests kept adding rule on top of rule and ritual on top of ritual, we do the same thing within Christendom. That means all the churches and all the denominations that claim Christ. Then there is sin, and then there is selfishness, and then there is presumption that God likes me and people like me more than God likes those people over there, who are not like me. That presumption was sort of a same one when you think about it that drug down ancient Israel in its ministry, time after time, when they forgot that they had a job to do. Not a special status to glory in and sit down, they had a job to do to be a light unto the nations, it says in the Old Testament.

We have a job to do – not a special status to glory in and sit down and be happy and do nothing – but we have a job to do. We are to share Christ's love and to make disciples, to give the hope and encouragement that Christ gave to others. When we sit back and say God likes me best, that's not acting new. That's old. God did this new thing in Jesus Christ not just for you and for me, but for the whole world. It is new wine. It is widespread invitation of forgiveness and grace and life eternal, and none of that can be contained within old wine skins or a narrow way of worship.

A lot of people have a lot of different worship styles. You know, we have at 8:28, drums and electric guitars. Twenty years ago, probably, a pastor would have been burned at the stake for even suggesting that at Main Street. Right? 25 years ago? We have that now. There's more than one way to worship God.

God has let loose the power of His love on earth, and it has already overcome sin and death, and ultimately the winning side on all conflicts, personal conflicts or global conflicts, is God's side. Death and judgment and violence in God's name are burst wide open with this new wine, which Jesus brought. Jesus took these on and won, but there are still skirmishes rippling through God's creation.

Now, back to the wedding in Canaan of Galilee. The first miracle here recorded in the Gospel of John. Now, the Gospel of John comes with so much commentary and explanation, different from the other three Gospels, and it shows that all the miracles were just occasions for gathering a crowd and for Jesus to teach so that the people would understand who He was. They, in themselves, were not the important thing, but they caught people's eyes and ears so that He could teach. After this first miracle, it says His disciples, they were already following, they were already interested, but after the miracle it said, well, now, they believed.

He had no interest that they were running out of wine. That's not the point, but what He did was to act and to reveal who He was, God in flesh, and what He came to do. Symbolically, He turned old, ritual water into new and fine wine. The old wine was so

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different from the new wine in Christ. We are beyond, or should be, judgment of outsiders and narrowly defined recipients of whom God can love. That has no place in the Gospel. We are beyond, or should be, death to enemies and hatred of enemies. That has no place in the Gospel. God’s love limited by race or bloodline has no place in the Gospel. Are there any standards? Yes. Love God with your whole heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus added one more thing. Love even your enemy. That’s new wine.

Martin Luther said love God and do what you like. Now, some people have taken that as sort of a license to do anything, but that’s not right. It means if you truly love God then you can do what you like because the love of God within you will enable you and make you want to love others. The love of God within you will transform you and change you. This new wine – literally or theologically – makes you act different. An air of superiority because of theology alone has no place in the Gospel. You know, the Gospel of Luke also has that story of the Good Samaritan. In that Good Samaritan story, have you noticed a man beaten, bleeding, naked in the ditch, and a theologian walks by. A Bible scholar walks by this man in need. They don’t stop. They don’t help. The man who stops was a Samaritan. He had the worst theology and the worst bloodline according to those folks around Jesus in Jesus’ day. He was a despised Samaritan, who stopped and helped and proved to be a neighbor to the one in need. I think that parable has only one message. Good theology and good breeding have no place in the Gospel. That, too, is new wine. The better you think you are, and the more deserving you think you are, the more you think God is impressed by what you do and don’t do, the more you think like that, the further you are from the Gospel, the new teaching that Jesus revealed. The more you try to constrict and contain what God is doing on the earth, the less you can understand what a new thing God has done in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is not just a patch on the old ways. He burst the old ways wide open. In Christ, the world saw that we are all sinners. In Christ, we are all offered salvation as a gift, and yet, too many people keep right on trying to earn it, right on trying to impress God, and trying to help God out by presuming to judge others in God’s name. God doesn’t need that kind of help.

The new way, the new wine of Jesus Christ is bigger than we think, broader than we think, but we keep falling into the old ways of limiting and narrowing what God can do and whom God can work through.

Now, listen to me carefully, this is where the staff will make fun of me. Stay with me. They hate it when I say that. If you are a fan of the Methodist or a fan of the Baptist or a fan of the Presbyterian, which of those preferences do you think makes superior and more deserving in God’s eyes? Or if you’re a fan of the Democratic party or a fan of the Republican party, which preference do you think makes you more superior or deserving in God’s eyes? Or if you’re a fan of the industrial North or a fan of the rural South, which preference do you think makes you more superior or deserving in God’s eyes? What Jesus offered is grace, is a gift. You can’t deserve a gift.

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When we know that all is grace, when we know that Jesus' love, death, and resurrection trumps all the categories that we invent to feel superior than other people, what personal preference do we want to lift before God, and say, here, this makes me worthy? Dividing and pointing fingers is the old way. Race and ritual and national and bloodline distinctions were all burst wide open by Jesus' new wine and the universal falling of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh, the prophecy Joel made and we say was fulfilled at Pentecost. God's Kingdom has come upon the earth. It is still rolling; it is still growing through God's people. No other kingdoms ultimately matter anymore, not ultimately. Every other distinction must be secondary to the new thing that God is doing upon the earth. Love of God and love of neighbor and even love of enemy is possible now. Those old divisions can't be patched up and baptized and blessed in Jesus' name. New wine.

What God gave us in Jesus Christ is newer and greater and grander and different from anything that has come before. When we fully appreciate it, all we can do is rejoice and share the good news that God was in Christ doing a completely different thing, and God has done it. God has done it. Not us! Not people like us! Not fans of what we are fans of! God has done it! Done a new thing in Jesus Christ, and it was not a small thing, not just one extra ritual here and there. It was a completely new thing, and this Gospel is not anti-Semitic. It is pro grace. It is pro unity of need for we are all sinners. It is pro sufficiency of God's love for all.

God in Christ has overcome sin and death, and unites whomsoever will come to share and grow in His love and light. This is news! This is good news! This is the Gospel. Amen.